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# *A Foreign Woman Researcher in a Purdah Society: Opportunities and Challenges for Knowledge Production in the 2000s*

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This paper aims to further discussions on access to "foreign" worlds, limits in knowledge production, and the role of gender relations in field research. What follows is an engagement with arguments developed by Hanna Papanek and Carroll Pastner in this journal some decades ago. They both drew on fieldwork experiences in Pakistan to argue that foreign women fieldworkers can (sometimes) take advantage of ambiguities in the social structures of Purdah societies, that is, societies characterized by "sexual segregation and the seclusion of women" (Pastner 1982:262), to flexibly position themselves and to be able to interact with both men and women. This paper rethinks their arguments and evaluates the current situation on the basis of fieldwork experience as a foreign woman in Pakistan in the late 2000s. It argues that possibilities for foreign women to get physical access to men's worlds, although still available, remain limited and in some ways have become more restricted (including access to women's worlds) due to political developments in recent decades. The paper also argues that, irrespective of the feasibility of physical access to other gender's worlds, it is necessary to reflect on subjectivities through which access to "foreign" worlds is mediated and knowledge is produced.

**Key words**: research, gender, Pakistan, fieldwork, subjectivities

## Introduction: Re-rethinking the Woman Fieldworker in a Purdah Society

Hanna Papanek's (1964) and Carroll Pastner's (1982) contributions to this journal in the 1960s and 1980s provide an inspiring ground to reflect fieldwork experiences today and compare fieldwork situations (including fieldwork methodologies) in Pakistan over a time span of nearly 50 years. Papanek and Pastner, drawing on their own fieldwork experiences in Pakistan, discussed opportunities and challenges of doing field research as a foreign woman in a "Purdah society," defined by them as a society that is strongly characterized by institutionalized forms of gender segregation and women's seclusion.

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Papanek argued in her paper that, in societies where local women are physically and socially secluded, foreign women actually enjoy a higher degree of "role flexibility" than either local or foreign men. She posited that foreign women could take advantage of ambiguities in the social structures of Purdah societies to flexibly position themselves and to be able to access male and female physical spaces and interact with both local men and local women, in particular for the purpose of producing new research knowledge. Pastner largely agreed with Papanek; yet, she highlighted that there could be situations of Purdah in which role flexibility was substantially reduced. Pastner (1982:264) closed her text with calling on male and female fieldworkers to "take under advisement the experiences of their predecessors."

In this paper, I reconsider Papanek's and Pastner's arguments and evaluate them vis-á-vis my own fieldwork experiences as a foreign woman field researcher in Pakistan in the late 2000s. Like Papanek and Pastner, I focus my writing on women *field researchers* and do not discuss other types of fieldworkers such as doctors, teachers, and development workers. With this focus, I aim to contribute to discussions about access to "foreign" worlds, limits in knowledge production, and the role of gender in field research beyond the context of Pakistan on the one hand and on current political aspects of research relations connecting "Muslim worlds" and "Western worlds" on the other hand.

The paper is organized as follows: First, I provide some background on the concept of Purdah and how it has been interpreted in Pakistan. Second, I outline the three different fieldwork contexts from which Pastner's, Papanek's, and my reflections emerged. Third, I provide insights into the feasibility of foreign women's role flexibility in rural situations today. Fourth, I describe how the changing sociopolitical context in Pakistan—rooting in geopolitical developments of the 1980s and after 9/11—is one reason for a new limitation to women fieldworkers' flexibility and physical access to men and women's worlds. Fifth, I demonstrate that categories and categorical differences beyond gender have mediated my access to knowledge about Purdah society beyond physical limitations. Sixth, I show how conceptual shifts have reshaped the ways I think of role flexibility and the field since the 1960s. Finally, I discuss opportunities and challenges related to future knowledge production in Pakistan and beyond.

## Purdah in Pakistan

Purdah (literally meaning "veil" or "curtain") is a common word used to describe a cultural practice or institution in much of South Asia to deal with gender order at a societal level. Purdah is largely associated with Islamic religion, values, and culture. However, Purdah, as it has been practiced among Muslims, has many features in common with other cultures and social systems, and the form and degree of observance has been highly variable among Islamic people (e.g., among different national cultures, social classes, and in different times). In the 1970s, Papanek (1971, 1973) herself developed the concepts of "separate worlds" and "symbolic shelter" to describe Purdah in South Asia. She used the notion of "separate worlds" to describe a gendered division of labor in terms of actual work allocated to different categories of people that creates two segregated worlds (one for men, one for women) characterized by a symmetrical relationship and mutual dependency. She invoked the term "symbolic shelter" to depict the coexistence of the segregation of the sexes and the protection of women in the family, for example, against sexual impulses and aggressions from unrelated men, that creates asymmetrical relations between women and men and subjects women more than men to social control mechanisms in order to ensure their modesty.

As a cultural practice, Purdah is contingent on time, space, and social interpretation and designates a broad set of behavior patterns under contestation rather than providing a fixed set of rules. Scholars like Devji (1991), Metcalf (1990), and Rouse (2004) have highlighted the deeper historical and cultural underpinnings of Purdah, arguing that Muslim reformist movements in the 19th century have given rise to complex and contradictory notions of feminine modesty and shame. This has been accompanied by contradictory interpretations of women's place and role in society and gender relations more generally. Islamic law does not, for example, provide unambiguous concepts for social interaction between men and women outside kinship relations (Mirza 2002; Syed 2010). Since there are no clear rules on how to interact with people from the opposite sex other than those related by kinship, the evaluation of whether a certain conduct (by women and men) conforms to Purdah or not has remained a matter of personal and collective interpretation, definition, and negotiation (Marsden 2008; Syed 2010; Syed and Ali 2006).

In Pakistan, Purdah has remained a constant element of everyday life until the present day. Most people want to observe, or are expected to observe, various degrees of Purdah. Pakistani women, however, are more often than men subject to seclusion in space and time through social practices and, as a consequence, also to various degrees of restriction in activity (CEDAW 2007; Gazdar 2008; Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi 2010; Shaheed 2009). The strongest form is women's isolation from the world beyond the home. Yet, more common are different degrees of women's veiling and limitations of women's physical mobility and exposure to men who are not kin. Examples for such forms of Purdah observance are urban women, who go to work and go shopping only if accompanied by a male relative, unrelated women and men being seated separately in urban and rural public means of transport, and non-kin women and men avoiding hand-shaking, eye-contact, exchanges of facial expressions and laughing in public spaces. More examples of how Purdah is practiced in Pakistan today and thoughts of how these practices differ from the 1960s and 1980s are provided in the following sections.

## Three Different Contexts of Gender Segregation

Papanek and Pastner based their arguments about "role flexibility" on extensive fieldwork experiences in Pakistan: Papanek's (1964:160) initial contribution on role flexibility resulted from four years of research with men and women from business communities of the "urban middle and lower-middle classes" in the Sindh Province in the early 1960s. Pastner (1982), in her reply to Papanek, drew on her research experiences in rural Pakistan in 1968-1969 and 1976-1977; first in an oasis in western Baluchistan Province and afterwards in a small fishing village west of Karachi.

Decades later, I myself conducted research in yet another part of the country, in the Hazara region of the Khyber-Pakhtunkha Province in northwest Pakistan. This occurred in 2006-2008 when I studied the nexus between governmental development policy and its implementation. While my ultimate focus was on working environments of Pakistani development practitioners (Grünenfelder 2012), I was initially interested on how development policies were more broadly implemented in local contexts. During my fieldwork, I interacted with people from the national, provincial, and local governments as well as with development practitioners and inhabitants of towns and rural villages. Sometimes, I worked alone; sometimes I employed fieldwork assistants (a female in 2007, a female and a male in 2008) because my knowledge of the Urdu language was only rudimentary, and I did not understand and speak Pashto and Hindko at all.

Like Pastner and Papanek, I had chosen a qualitative research design that included data generation methods such as participant observation, qualitative semi-structured and unstructured interviews and group discussions, and informal talks and discussions (Grünenfelder 2012). Self-reflection and discussions about fieldwork with other—female and male, foreign and Pakistani—researchers, activists, field assistants, and development practitioners form the basis for the arguments presented here. The discussions I had with other people showed that gendered challenges and opportunities related to fieldwork in a Purdah society remain a relevant topic today.

## Ongoing Limitations for Foreign Women's Physical Access to Gendered Spaces

Drawing on my fieldwork experiences, I believe that Hanna Papanek's main argument remains valid today. In many circumstances, foreign women enjoy opportunities to physically gain and maintain access[1] to men's worlds while both foreign and Pakistani men without family ties find it nearly impossible to gain access to women's worlds. During my research, I not only obtained access to male development practitioners' offices but also to those of their female colleagues. I not only visited men's homes but also those of women. I was not limited to the official visitor's rooms in village homes, but I could also enter court yards and private rooms, which is commonly not allowed for non-kin men.

Nevertheless, I argue that the feasibility for role flexibility has remained limited for foreign women field researchers throughout the past decades, above all in rural areas of Pakistan. I second Pastner's experiences that Purdah observance varies significantly across "community" types and in consequence also the possibilities for researchers' interpretations of their roles in order to gain physical access to another gender's worlds. While I worked in various parts of Pakistan (Islamabad, Peshawar, and the Hazara region in particular), I also worked with different "community" types. People with whom I interacted came, for example, from rural, semi-rural, and urban middle classes; were employed and self-employed; some had experiences abroad or in other part of Pakistan; while others have never left their home villages. Interactions between non-kin Pakistani men and Pakistani women varied across these communities. For example, I regularly worked at a research institute in Islamabad where, even though certain barriers between men's and women's worlds existed, the mixing between Pakistani men and Pakistani women was quite common. In contrary, in small towns and above all in rural villages in the Hazara region, the mixing between Pakistani men and Pakistani women was more restricted. There, restrictions for cross-gender interactions were often reflected in separate physical spaces for men and women, for example, in homes and offices (see also Besio 2006; Mirza 2002).

The more rigidly these spaces were gender-segregated for local people, the more difficult I found it to physically access the other gender's spaces as a researcher. Three examples illustrate that physical access to gendered spaces has remained a challenge for foreign women in the late 2000s. The first example, drawn from my fieldnotes, demonstrates how I was denied physical access to a men's space (notably one with an important symbolic meaning to me) in the very beginning of my field research in a rural village:

> Zehra[2] [the female research assistant] and I [Julia] are invited to sit with the women in the inner rooms [of a village leader's house]. We introduce our research project and ourselves and try to strike up an acquaintance with the women and answer their questions. In the meantime, our middleman is invited to the *behtak*, the visitors' room, where he presents us and our research to the male village elders. After a while, he convinces the village leaders to authorize and support our research in *Amda Bela* [village].[3] I am very happy about this, but I also feel strange, for I do not know what happened in the *behtak*. I was absent from a process that is of such crucial importance to my research. (Grünenfelder 2012:98-99)

The second example links back to the discussion about strategic dressing and dresses as an "external attribute" of role flexibility. Hanna Papanek (1964) described how she was able to gain access to both men's and women's rooms at the mourning ceremony of Aga Khan III in the city of Karachi through the strategic wearing of Western dress. She argued that the Western dress allowed her to take on a male role that guaranteed access to men's and women's spaces, while wearing a local dress had been interpreted as her acceptance of the limitations on behavior expected of women so clothed. Carroll Pastner (1982) countered with an example where she too chose Western "external attributes" strategically to take on a male, or more precisely, a non-gendered, role: Pastner went unescorted and unveiled to the local bazaar, a place where local women would never have ventured, much less unescorted and unveiled. She described that her "humiliation at being lectured at for [her] behavior by a passing civil servant was compounded by having to make [her] way through a jostling crowd of incredulous adolescent male students" (Pastner 1982:263). I myself have experienced similar incidents, even in the city of Islamabad, when walking unescorted (though attired in Pakistani dress, including *dupatta* [the Pakistani scarf that covers the chest]). Groups of men used to stare and jeer at me when I walked by myself, unlike women escorted by a male relative or middle class women driving by in a car.[4] I also experienced that local men in a town in Hazara censured my non-observance of (their interpretation of) Purdah—unaccompanied walking from the guest house to the nearby office after dusk—with verbal abuse and even physical assaults.

The third example illustrates that women as well may condemn "inappropriate" (dressing) behavior—and as a consequence limit access to women's spaces—if they deem it necessary. The following extracts from a conversation (in my absence) between Bashira, a female development practitioner, and Namira, a female field assistant in my research team, demonstrates how important it was for me to adapt dressing to local circumstances. In this conversation, Namira tried to

find out how our research team was perceived by inhabitants of a rural village:

> Bashira [female development practitioner] [in Urdu]: … Because of the recent threats and attacks against women professionals, women in the village were scared to join the training program organized by the NGOs, other organizations.
> Namira [female fieldwork assistant]: Is that fear typically because of the presence of foreign women? Do people become aggressive due to the presence of foreign women, foreign women working with the local women? Were there any comments from the local community?
> Bashira: No, not really. There weren't any such comments. They are aware of the differences between our culture and the foreigner's culture. …But she [Julia] is wearing Pakistani dress. They know that she is a foreigner; she has come from there and…. …[S]he was wearing long shirts. She is wearing *shalwar kameez* [Pakistani dress]. ...Her meeting behavior with elders was very good, and she met with elders like a family member. I was impressed from her behavior. Also to the villagers, if you show a little respect to them, they are very much impressed. (Group discussion, July 7, 2008)

This conversation indicates that if a foreign woman does not dress according to local customs, she may even be restricted in her access to local women's spaces. Flexibility with dressing was limited in this context and so was role flexibility.

Although foreign women's access to certain spaces has remained limited until today, fieldwork contexts have indeed changed tremendously since the 1960s and 1980s. Fieldwork situations have changed, among other things due to major sociopolitical developments and their long-term impacts on society. Since the 1980s, Pakistan has witnessed an increase in development projects and NGOs funded through international aid. As a result, Pakistani and international development workers, both male and female, have sought access to various communities and groups of people in order to implement such projects (Jan and Jan 2000; Rasmussen et al. 2007). Notwithstanding the stated intentions of development practitioners, Masooda Bano (2008) has shown that the public perception of the term "NGO"—usually associated with development work—is overwhelmingly negative in Pakistan. Such developments have complicated the relation between communities and outsiders in general.[5] Additionally, historical transformations in gender policy have had profound impacts on Pakistani society. I argue that the conceptualization of a "Pakistani woman" as a counter model to a generic "Western woman" is an important aspect that shapes the context of foreign women's fieldwork and the feasibility of role flexibility, as will be shown in the following section.

## The "Foreign Woman" as a Counter Model to the "Pakistani Woman"

From the mid-1970s onward, gender and sexual mores became central to political discourses in Pakistan and have had far reaching consequences for Pakistani women and the perception of Western women (Cook 2001; Grünenfelder 2013; Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987; Rouse 2004; Weiss 1985). According to Farida Shaheed (2010:858), during the regime of General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977-1988), the notion of a "Pakistani woman" was replaced "by an 'Islamic woman' who dressed in a particular manner, was educated—if at all—in certain subjects and segregated institutions, and was preferably silent and invisible." Gender segregation was strengthened, and gender inequality was formally codified into several laws (Khan 2003; Weiss 1985, 1994), such as the *Qanun-e-Shahadat* (law of evidence) that restricted the testimony of two women being equal to that of one man to financial cases. However, Zia-ul-Haq not only changed laws; he also managed to encourage the public to act as enforcers of religious mores and thus to control women in a comprehensive way (Cook 2001; Jafar 2005; Khan 2003; Shaheed 2010; Weiss 1994). In particular, men and women from the middle classes have become more restrictive regarding women's mobility and interactions with non-kin (and foreign) men since the 1980s (Bhutta 2013; Shaheed 2010).

Papanek's, Pastner's, and my differing experiences with dressing and cross-gender interactions outside kin-relationships seem to reflect exactly this sociopolitical shift in the conceptualization of the "Pakistani woman" and the "Western woman." Shaheed (2010:858) notes that the re-conceptualization of a "Pakistani woman" as an "Islamic woman" had consequences on clothing as an external gender attribute: "In contrast to national dress for men, women's 'Islamic dress' meant compulsory chadors for all government school students and teachers as well as women state employees."[6] The ways of Pakistani women's dressing, and veiling in particular, are—as Fadwa El Guindi (1999) cogently argued—more than just about modesty and seclusion; they are an expression of identity. Similarly, the ways of Western women's dressing in Pakistan is an expression of identity, which involves the possibility of perpetuating transcultural power relations (Cook 2005). Hanna Papanek's call for a strategic wearing of western dress needs to be re-evaluated under these circumstances.

Tensions between what is perceived as "the West" and Pakistan/"the Muslim world" and about visions of modernity have increased and taken new forms since the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Western women have been increasingly perceived as symbols of immorality and imperialism by certain segments of Pakistani society (Rouse 2004). This has further complicated interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims (Afzal-Khan 2007; see also Naher 2010 and Sultana 2007 for Bangladesh, and Bolognani 2007 for access to Pakistanis in Britain). I was quite struck, for example, when I read the following excerpt from an email sent to me (in English) by a former Pakistani Muslim female research assistant:

> I had spent some time with you (and you were a non-Muslim for me), but I always considered you equal to Rabia [a female Muslim colleague]. I mean, at that time there was no difference for me between Rabia and you

> in terms of respect. But let us assume, for example, that after a few years, the Swiss government had some problems with the politicians of Pakistan and declared war on Pakistan, and in that war many innocent/civilian Muslims start dying. After this incident, can you think that I will be able to treat you equal to Rabia? Of course not, because by then I will be having hatred against the government and people of Switzerland. So dear, this is what is going on in Muslim countries against America. And trust me, all this happened after America's attack on Iraq and after 9/11 because after the killing of Sadaam Hussain in Iraq there is no reason for Americans to stay in Iraq and carry on their cruel activities against civilians. Likewise, they have no proof who really was involved in the 9/11 incidents; then how come they attack on Afghanistan and then Pakistan and start killing innocent civilians? The sure result of such acts of Americans would be that all Muslims will consider it as a binding to kill Americans because they are killing our innocent Muslim sisters and brothers.
>
> Another example to make it clear to you: for example, during our stay in Amda Bela village, if some extremist Muslim from the tribal areas approached us (you and me) and tried to kill you by thinking that you are not a Muslim. What would be my reaction? Of course I will never ever allow him to attack on you because for me you are an innocent person (irrespective whether you are a Muslim or not). But in case I knew that you are like Americans who hate innocent Muslims and want to kill them, then I won't be able to stop that extremist to attack on you. (female field assistant's email to author, June 7, 2011)

I received this email when I was back in Switzerland. Yet there were indeed political issues during my field research that made me suspend my work for a time because of security concerns. One such instance followed an evening in July 2008 when—according to my field assistant—Pakistani television broadcast a news story about Dr. Aafyia Siddique, a Pakistani scientist who disappeared with her three children in 2003, only to be later found in Afghanistan in July 2008. There had been rumors for some years that she was held and tortured by Americans at Bagram prison in Afghanistan, and the widespread belief that she had been detained and tortured by Americans angered many Pakistanis. After I discussed the matter with the two field assistants and a high administrative official of our district, I decided not to go to Amda Bela village as planned but to rather wait and see whether—and if yes, how—Mullahs (Muslim religious leaders) and others would react to this news. Since neither public diatribes nor anti-western campaigns were reported in the area, we went to the village two days later.

While in the 1960s, Papanek (1964) argued that it is difficult for a foreign male fieldworker to prove his lack of inherent aggressiveness which the society attributes to men in general, I felt that during my fieldwork, it was difficult for me as a foreign (Western) female fieldworker to prove a lack of inherent aggressiveness that large parts of society attributes to non-Muslim Westerners and in particular to female non-Muslim Westerners. Western women have increasingly been accused of pursuing imperialistic practices and policies that endanger local gender values. And since (non-)aggressiveness in this context is perceived in very diverse ways by different people, it was not only difficult for me to prove a lack of inherent aggressiveness, yet also to actually live up to the promise of non-aggressiveness or to negotiate what aggressiveness is. Therefore, voices referring to "local culture" and "Islamic values" have impacted not only Pakistani but also Western women's everyday lives and their options to interact with local men and women in the 2000s.

## Intersecting Identities and Their Impact on Physical Access

Although gender is still one of the most influential social attributes that impacts everyday life in Pakistan, there are other attributes and categories that impact access and knowledge production during fieldwork.[7] Reflecting on her different positionings, Pastner mentioned some of the social attributes that were influential in her fieldwork and her physical access to certain spaces defined by identity: non-Muslim (religious affiliation), non-Baluch/physical appearance (ethnic affiliation), non-Pakistani (nationality),[8] accompanied by husband (marital status and evidence of protection), and accompanied by child (evidence of parenthood). I perceived all these categories as relevant in my fieldwork as well. Yet, I positioned myself, and was positioned, differently than Papanek and Pastner as I will illustrate with an example in the following paragraph.

In contrast to Papanek and Pastner who both conducted their field research in company with their husbands, I did my field research independent of a male relative and a male foreign researcher. For me, being unaccompanied had at least two consequences. One is that I had to establish trustful relationships with non-kin Pakistani men to get access to men's, and often even to women's, worlds. One example is my dependence on a middleman to gain access to female and also male villagers via a male village leader (as in the example in one of the previous sections). Another illustration is my dependence on a male field assistant to establish and negotiate links with male government officials who often did not take me seriously as a professional woman. In addition to my dependence on male co-workers, I was evidently "unprotected." I think that it was my "unprotectedness" that made me experience numerous challenges, including the receipt of sexually-offensive text messages from clearly work-related male contact persons.[9] Similar experiences were reported to me by Pakistani and foreign women but not by foreign men. It would have been interesting to know whether I experienced these challenges if I were accompanied by a husband like Papanek and Pastner.[10]

Some other personal attributes, not mentioned by Pastner, turned out to be relevant in the course of my fieldwork. I was considered relatively young and thus particularly responsible to comply with gender norms. I was considered literate and conversant in different cultural and/or political realms (Grünenfelder 2012) and thus able to interact with people of different (educational) backgrounds. I was considered a student without a Ph.D. degree or professorship and thus

symbolically not very powerful. I was considered as a person without funds for development projects and thus uninteresting in any financial or symbolic sense. Another attribute seemed particularly interesting to me because I have not encountered it in other publications so far,[11] that is, the nature of fieldwork and fieldwork interactions. During fieldwork in a rural area of Hazara region, it became clear that villagers became more and more suspicious of our research team because villagers did not know the character and goals of the research we conducted. The following extracts of a discussion provide some insights:

> Namira [to peon, in Urdu]: Ok, right. When we went for the first time to Amda Bela village, it was not like that. But then we have visited two, three times, and now the people are talking like that….
> Chacha [12] [Peon]: It means that: why are they visiting only one village? That is because the work done by NGOs…they visit only after a week or 10 days….
> Namira: Once in one month….
> [Later in the same interview]
> Chacha [to Nusra, in Urdu]: Can she [Julia] understand the language Urdu?
> Nusra: No, she can only say *"Kiya Hall Hay"* [how are you]. She cannot understand Pashto.
> Chacha: In Swat I was on duty in the Zarobi Mine. So there was a boy and a girl; they were students doing their Ph.D.s…I asked them, "You cannot speak Urdu, can you?" The boy was silent and the girl said, "No, but I speak Pashto." I was astonished. How can an English girl speak Pashto? I asked her, "You can speak Pashto?" She said, "Little." And then I asked her, "Where have you learned it?" She said, "I am the student of an Afghan teacher."
> [Later in the same interview]
> Julia [to Nusra, in English]: I feel very sad that there is such a bad feeling now [in the village; suspicion against the research team]
> Namira: Chacha was saying that he had some feelings. That he wanted to tell you….
> Julia: What did he say?
> Namira: Chacha said, "Don't go [to the village]; don't take the risk, because now, people are more suspicious about you since you are visiting a lot." "Because," Chacha is saying, "the NGOs and other people, they just visit once in two months. That is why people don't care for them."
> [Later in the same interview]
> Namira [to Julia, in English]: …We don't have any questionnaire. Because people are used to…If somebody comes to the village, they have questionnaires. But we are just talking with people. This is a new form, a new method, and they are not used to it. So that's why they maybe are also suspicious. Because they expect that if somebody comes to the village, they have their questionnaires… that they are filling out always the same questions…. (interview, July 23, 2008)

In these interview extracts, two aspects become visible as attributes that intersect with gender: local people seemed to be familiar with the concept of people doing ethnographic research based on concepts of immersion and "going native," including the proper learning of language and residing in villages (as the "English girl") and with people interacting with locals once every two months (as development workers). What they were not familiar and therefore found suspicious was the concept of visiting only one village frequently without living there. They also seemed to be familiar with fieldwork interactions based on questionnaires, yet not with fieldwork interactions that are based on qualitative semi- and unstructured interviews, some of them recorded. After intense discussions on this and further aspects, we finally decided not to go to the village.

The extracts above show well how role flexibility can be reduced through attributes other than gender and that field researchers can only take positions that are accepted by others. Yet what does it mean if categorical differences intersect in complex ways and constitute peoples' multiple identities in relational and contextualized ways?

## Beyond Physical Access: New Conceptualizations of "Role Flexibility" and the "Field"

Thus far, I have tried to compare Papanek's, Pastner's, and my experiences mainly at a level of physical access to men's and women's spheres of Pakistani society. I explored questions such as whether and how it was possible for me to get physical access to men's worlds as a foreign woman, how flexibly I could define my role to get and maintain this access, and which situations provided flexibility to interpret my role differently than others. The basic theme, however, that underlies all these questions is "access to foreign worlds and knowledge"; understood in a broader sense than just "physical access to people." *How could/can I as a foreign woman gain access to data that could become the basis of new knowledge?*

Hanna Papanek and Carroll Pastner did not explicitly integrate this question into their arguments. Yet, I think that our different evaluations are not exclusively due to differing fieldwork situations but are also due to differing conceptual perspectives with which we approach the topic of role flexibility and access to the field. Papanek's conceptualization of "role flexibility," for example, seems to be largely rooted in a behavioralist model of agency in contrast to my understanding of a subject's positioning that is rooted in a poststructuralist model of agency (Davies 1997; Foucault 1982); and Pastner's conceptualization of the "field" reflects an understanding of space as a physical container in contrast to my understanding of the field as a relational space (Massey 2005).

Since the 1980s, considerable conceptual reflection about the "field" and access as a process of ethnographic fieldwork has taken place, particularly in anthropology and geography (England 1994; Katz 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009; Nast 1994; Nightingale 2011). In a feminist geographic understanding, the field is not merely conceptualized as "a place" or "a people" but as a social space constructed through everyday experiences, interacting bodies and problems (Nast 1994). This means that as field researchers, we are always positioned simultaneously in a number of not only physical but also social fields and have to negotiate "various kinds and degrees of differences—be they based on gender, class, ethnicity, 'race,' sexuality, and so

on" (Nast 1994:57). The "field" and a woman field researcher co-constitute subjectivity.

The acknowledgement that the field is a site of multiple social positionings implies that we can never be "outsiders" or "insiders" in such an absolute sense as Papanek (1964) demanded from foreign women fieldworkers. Even if we feel like absolute "insiders" in relation to gender, we may be simultaneously "outsiders" in relation to class, Whiteness, and postcolonial positioning; attributes of field researchers and research subjects simultaneously overlap and diverge (see, e.g., Besio 2003; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009; Sultana 2007; Zubair, Martin, and Victor 2012). Additionally, our own positionings are continuously co-produced with other actors through performative acts, making it impossible to fully forecast how we will be positioned in certain situations (Rose 1997).

Illustrative of how intersectional identities shaped access beyond gender are two of my encounters with a young woman in one of the rural villages. First, after spending quite some time with a group of women in one of the villages, it turned out that it was impossible for me and Namira, the fieldwork assistant, to freely speak with a young woman and get to know her view of life even though we tried several times. Elder women never let her alone with us and answered most of my questions themselves. Second, I complicated the relationship with the same young woman when I showed her some pictures of my family and my hometown, one of them showing an architectural detail of a cathedral. When I mentioned the term "church," she got very confused and started asking many questions to Namira. It was only in this moment that the young woman realized that I am not Muslim. This may have been quite a shock for her, since religious schools in rural areas often portray non-Muslims as immoral and bad people. These two examples illustrate how gender intersects in complex ways with other identities such as age and (alleged) religious affiliation.

The concept of the "field" as a site of multiple social positioning also implies that knowledge production is relational and situational, (Haraway 1988) and in consequence, we need to include into our thinking people such as husbands, field assistants, and local interview partners with their specific social attributes when discussing access and role flexibility (Khan et al. 2007; Palmary 2011). Knowledge production is shaped by all involved research participants, sometimes even if they are not physically present in the field. In the course of this research, the research assistant's class, educational, gender, and rural-urban attributes became relevant in certain interactions in addition to my own subjectivity. It became obvious quite quickly that the second research assistant originally grew up in a rural environment and found it easier to communicate with people from the village than the first research assistant who spent all her life in Islamabad. Additionally, both female research assistants—despite their different backgrounds—were easily distinguishable from the female interview partners due to their urban-style dressing, that is, their specific type of fabric, colors of the dresses, and embroidery.

## Conclusion: Opportunities and Challenges for Knowledge Production in Purdah Societies

In this paper, I have hypothesized that what Hanna Papanek argued in the 1960s, still (or again) proves true for Pakistan, that is: in "on the ground" fieldwork settings,[13] it is often easier for foreign women to interact with local men than it is for foreign men to interact with local women, above all in rural environments. However, I have provided a number of examples that demonstrate the limited feasibility of flexibility for foreign women in the early 21st century. Similar to Carroll Pastner, I have experienced that there are still/again profound limits to cross-gender interactions that, in consequence, limit the feasibility to define one's own role (or as I would say: positions) flexibly. The role of gender cannot be explained solely on the basis of local societal structures since it is influenced by highly politicized relations at a transnational level. As fieldworkers, we are always positioned simultaneously in a number of fields and have to negotiate various kinds and degrees of differences, including but not limited to gender and citizenship as Pastner's term "foreign women fieldworker" suggests. Sometimes, categorical differences other than or intersecting with gender differences are more relevant (see also Cook 2005). In the paper, I further paid special attention to the fact that not only the subjectivities of fieldworkers alone, yet also the subjectivities of other people present in field interactions (such as husbands and field assistants) impact the feasibility of flexibility.

Does it then make sense to discuss "role flexibility" and "positionality" at all if we consider all knowledge as partial anyway? A foreign woman will not have the same insights as a male colleague into men's worlds. Gillian Rose (1997) has nicely pointed out that it is not possible to fully understand one's own positionings, which makes it difficult to reflect on own subjectivities in the process of knowledge production. Despite these reservations, we have to acknowledge that we all produce diverse knowledge(s) in our partiality (see also Haraway 1988) and that such a diversity is needed for the formulation of sound policies.

These findings have several implications for research in Purdah societies and in Pakistan in particular:

- First, women—and not only foreign women—are urgently needed to conduct research with Pakistani women in rural areas, because men—Pakistani and foreign—are still not allowed to interact with Pakistani women in most contexts. Such field research will *provide empirical knowledge about Pakistani women's worlds*, that is, worlds that are still largely absent from academic and non-academic discourse and that are often not adequately reflected in policies.

- Second, whenever and wherever researchers carry out research, we should explore from a methodological perspective how subjective perspectives contribute and hinder insights on global geopolitics, for example, on development

concepts and practices. Such reflections will ideally result in more diverse and more robust knowledge about identity, belief, behavior, and quotidian life in a rapidly changing world. It can also *contribute to a better understanding of the political nature of fieldwork and the politics that connect global and local levels*, including a sensibility to the limits of our own knowledge and on how we—foreign and Pakistani women researchers—possibly perpetuate imperialist relations.

- Third, I suggest that as foreign and Pakistani researchers, we need to *discuss ethical issues of doing research in spaces such as Pakistan that experience significant geopolitical violence through military action as well as neocolonial forms of aid and development, by both foreign and domestic actors*. A sensibility for others' constructions of ourselves and our own positionings as researchers will be a necessary component of ethical decision making in fieldwork settings.

**Notes**

[1]I understand "access" as a constant process of negotiation (see, e.g., Korczynski 2004).

[2]All names are pseudonyms.

[3]The name of the village is a pseudonym.

[4]I have heard many stories of verbal and physical assaults from other, mainly young, Pakistani and non-Pakistani women. Also media frequently report on that issue (see, e.g., Ellick 2010).

[5]The situation must have become even more complicated since a Pakistani doctor was convicted of treason in 2012 after helping the CIA find Osama bin Laden, using a vaccination campaign as his cover.

[6]While a feminist movement including many feminist groups developed in response to Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization agenda, they remained limited to urban areas largely.

[7]My understanding of subjects as multiply constituted and positioned draws on conceptualizations by poststructuralist, feminist, and postcolonial scholars (see the following section).

[8]Drawing on my fieldwork experience, I suggest that nationality is currently perceived along mainly the following dimensions: Pakistani and dual (including Pakistani) citizen—citizen of a hostile nation, such as United States nationality in 2008—citizen of a non-hostile nation, such as Swiss nationality in 2008.

[9]Here, my experiences differ from those of Hanna Papanek who was teased in private but not in business situations.

[10]Interestingly, Pastner argued that the presence of her husband made it impossible for her to interact with local men alone (that is, without these men's kinswomen or her husband) because local men took it as their obligation to respect Purdah in reciprocity to Pastner's husband's observance of Purdah.

[11]This is true except maybe indirectly when researchers discussed how they were suspected by locals of being spies and secret agents (see, e.g., Crang and Cook 2007).

[12]The peon was called *chacha* [uncle] by everybody and not by his name.

[13]I use "on the ground" as opposed to "virtual" fieldwork settings, in which researchers aim to gain and maintain access through virtual interactions.

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